

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6692
INFO ALL EC CAPITALS
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SUBJECT: LABOR INCREASES ITS MAJORITY IN HAMILTON;
SNP ROUTED

REF: LONDON 7651

SUMMARY: LABOR, AS EXPECTED, RETAINED ITS HAMILTON SEAT
IN THE MAY 31 BY-ELECTION, DOUBLING ITS MAJORITY OVER THE
SECOND PLACE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP). THE OUTCOME
WAS A STRIKING VICTORY FOR LABOR AND THE
THIRD SUCCESSIVE POPULAR SETBACK FOR THE SNP, AGAIN
DEMONSTRATING THE SHARP RESURGENCE OF LABOR STRENGTH
IN SCOTLAND. AND THAT IS VERY REASSURING FOR CALLAGHAN
IF, AS WE BELIEVE LIKELY, HE OPTS FOR A FALL GENERAL
ELECTION. END SUMMARY.

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1. THE LABOR PARTY RETAINED ITS HAMILTON SEAT IN THE
MAY 31 BY-ELECTION, INCREASING ITS SHARE OF THE TOTAL
VOTE TO 51 PERCENT, AS COMPARED TO 47.5 PERCENT IN
OCTOBER 1974. THIS REPRESENTED A 4.5 PERCENT SWING TO
LABOR. ITS MAJORITY OVER THE SECOND PLACE SNP NEARLY
DOUBLED THAT OF 1974, DESPITE A SOMEWHAT LOWER TURNOUT

(72 PERCENT). THE SNP SAW ITS SHARE OF THE TOTAL VOTE DECLINE BY 5.5 PERCENT, DESPITE A STRONG AND ABLE CANDIDATE, MARGO MACDONALD, WHO IS A NATIVE OF HAMILTON. THE RESULTS WERE ALSO FAVORABLE FOR THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY AND FOLLOWED RECENT TRENDS -- THEY TOO INCREASED THEIR SHARE OF THE VOTE BY 3.5 PERCENT, TAKING 13 PERCENT OF THE TOTAL. THE LIBERAL VOTE DROPPED FROM 4 PERCENT IN 1974 TO 2.5 PERCENT.

2. THE NEW LABOR MP, GEORGE HAMILTON, IS AN ABLE AND ARTICULATE MODERATE WHO COMES FROM THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT -- HE WAS PREVIOUSLY THE SCOTTISH ORGANIZER FOR THE GENERAL AND MUNICIPAL WORKERS UNION. HE IS A STRONG PRO-DEVOLUTIONIST, A PRO-MARKETEER (THOUGH NOT A FANATIC) AND SHOULD BE A WELCOME ADDITION TO THE RANKS OF LABOR MODERATES IN PARLIAMENT.

3. COMMENT: THE VICTORY WAS AN IMPORTANT, BUT BY NO MEANS CRITICAL, ONE FOR LABOR, AS IT CONFIRMED THAT PARTY'S RESURGENCE NORTH OF THE BORDER. CALLAGHAN WILL NO DOUBT FIND IT PARTICULARLY ENCOURAGING IF HE SHOULD DECIDE TO GO FOR A FALL ELECTION, AND THE RESULT IN OUR JUDGMENT WILL GIVE HIM ANOTHER NUDGE IN THAT DIRECTION. SOME OBSERVERS HAVE SPECULATED THAT THE HAMILTON BY-ELECTION MIGHT CAUSE HIM TO CALL A SNAP ELECTION THIS MONTH. THAT SEEMS TO US ABSURD. SINCE THE IMPROVEMENT LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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IN LABOR'S SCOTTISH FORTUNES, ACCORDING TO MOST OBSERVERS, IS DUE IN LARGE PART TO ITS DEVOLUTION STRATEGY, TO GO TO THE POLLS BEFORE THE DEVOLUTION BILL BECOMES LAW WOULD BE TO TRY TO SAVE THE BATH WATER BY THROWING OUT THE BABY. IT'S JUST NOT ON. SINCE ROBERTSON STRUCTURED HIS CAMPAIGN AROUND THE INDEPENDENCE ISSUE, THE BY-ELECTION RESULT MUST ALSO BE SEEN AS A POPULAR REJECTION OF THE SNP'S SEPARATIST ARGUMENTS.

4. THE SNP'S PERFORMANCE WAS A SERIOUS BLOW ON SEVERAL COUNTS. EVEN THOUGH IT HAD, IN RECENT WEEKS, BEEN EXPECTING TO LOSE, IT MUST HAVE BEEN PARTICULARLY GALLING BECAUSE IT WAS AT HAMILTON THAT THE SNP ELECTED ITS FIRST MP IN A 1967 BY-ELECTION. IT FOLLOWED REVERSES IN THE GARSADDEN BY-ELECTION AND LOCAL ELECTIONS, DESTROYING THE SNP'S ILLUSION OF INVINCIBILITY AND POSSIBLY ITS CONFIDENCE; REPUDIATED THE PARTY'S RAISON D'ETRE AND ITS "SCOTLAND'S OIL" SIREN SONG; AND DAMAGED THE POLITICAL REPUTATION OF WHAT WE AND MANY OBSERVERS CONSIDER TO BE THE PARTY' MOST ABLE AND ARTICULATE LEADER, MARGO MACDONALD. ALTHOUGH THE SNP WILL STILL REMAIN A FORCE IN SCOTTISH POLITICS -- THE 20 PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE

THAT CONSISTENTLY FAVORS SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE WOULD
SEEM TO CONSTITUTE A SIGNIFICANT HARD CORE OF POTENTIAL

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SNP SUPPORT -- IT HAS BEEN BADLY BATTERED. THE LOSS OF
ITS GROWTH MYSTIQUE WOULD SEEM PARTICULARLY DAMAGING,
FOR THE PARTY LACKS ANY KIND OF IDEOLOGICAL COHESION
OTHER THAN A COMMON DESIRE FOR INDEPENDENCE. ON OTHER
ISSUES THE VIEWS OF ITS SUPPORTERS SPAN THE POLITICAL
SPECTRUM FROM RIGHT TO LEFT, AND THE PARTY IS RATHER
SHARPLY DIVIDED ALONG CONSERVATIVE/SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC
LINES. THE HAMILTON SETBACK IS ALSO EXPECTED TO
INTENSIFY THE DEBATE BETWEEN THE "HARD" AND "SOFT" LINES
ON INDEPENDENCE -- THE HARDLINERS WANT THE PARTY TO GO
ALL OUT FOR INDEPENDENCE AND REGARD DEVOLUTION DIVERSION
FROM THIS OBJECTIVE; THE SOFTLINERS, INCLUDING
MRS. MACDONALD, PREFER A GRADUAL APPROACH TO INDEPENDENCE,
SEEING DEVOLUTION AS A WAY STATION TOWARD THIS GOAL.
HERETOFORE THE SOFTLINERS HAVE BEEN ASCENDANT. IT WILL
BE INTERESTING TO SEE HOW THE SNP ADOPTSTO ITS NEW
CIRCUMSTANCES.

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5. THE TORY PERFORMANCE, DESPITE THE FACT THEY WERE NEVER SERIOUS CONTENDERS FOR THE SEAT, MUST BE JUDGED AS GRATIFYING. DESPITE A WEAK CANDIDATE, THEY WON BACK A SIGNIFICANT SHARE OF VOTERS PREVIOUSLY LOST TO THE SNP, CONFIRMING THE TREND NOTED IN POLLS AND THE GARSADDEN BY-ELECTION. THIS SUGGESTS THE CONSERVATIVES CAN REASONABLY EXPECT TO REGAIN SEATS FROM THE SNP IN A GENERAL ELECTION. AS FOR THE LIBERALS. THE LESS SAID THE BETTER: THEY STARTED WITH VIRTUALLY NOTHING IN HAMILTON, AND IT ERODED. ON BALANCE, THERE CAN BE LITTLE DOUBT THAT THE VOTERS IN HAMILTON STRONGLY ENDORSED THE IDEA OF UNION, TEMPERED WITH INCREASED HOME RULE FOR SCOTLAND.

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